

Series: The End

Title: How to Wait for Jesus' Return

Text: Mark 13:32-37

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Verse 32

In Mark 13:32-37 Jesus gave a conclusion to His famous Olivet Discourse. He said, "Now concerning that day or hour no one knows—neither the angels in heaven nor the Son—but only the Father" (Mark 13:32). The opening words of verse 32 — "Now concerning" — indicate a transition in Jesus' sermon. They mark a change of focus. Starting in verse 32, Jesus focused on practical application for His disciples. His first teaching point revolved around the unknowability of the time of Christ's return.

The words "that day" are prophetic buzzwords in the Bible for the end of time. They carry similar meaning the oft-mentioned "day of the Lord." The concept is rooted in the Old Testament (Isaiah 2:12; Ezekiel 30:3; Joel 1:15; Amos 5:20; and Obadiah 1:15), but it is carried over and promoted in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 5:5; 1 Thessalonians 5:2; and 2 Peter 3:10). Mention of the great "day" of the Lord in the Bible is intended to evoke thoughts of judgment. For Christians, "that day" involves the return of Christ who will smite the nations (Revelation 19:11-15). It is, as one commentator has said, "the day of judgment of both Israel and the nations that marks the end of the present evil age and the beginning of the coming age of righteousness."¹

According to Jesus in our text, "no one knows" when the "day" of the Lord will occur. The exact timing of His return is not knowable for mere mortals. Jesus shared the same truth in Matthew 24:36.² The fact that only the Father knew the timing of Jesus' return did not diminish Jesus' Divine nature. Throughout Mark's gospel, Jesus has been presented as being one with God (Mark 1:11; 2:10 and 28; and 9:7). Instead of relegating Jesus to a less-than-divine status, our verse merely affirmed the way in which Jesus embraced a subordinate role through the incarnation (John 6:38 and Philippians 2:6-8). One has commented, "Ignorance of certain things was simply a part of Jesus' humanity, a part of his becoming a real human being."³

The reference to "that day" is the second coming of Christ, an event Jesus spoke of back in verse 26.⁴ The timing of the Abomination of Desolation was known to His disciples. Jesus had made that timing clear in verse 30. His words in verse 32 made it obvious that there was both a near and far fulfillment to His sermon. The timing of some things were known — the siege of Jerusalem would occur in His disciples' lifetime (Mark 13:30). The timing of other things were unknown — no one could know when

¹ Brooks, 217.

² Robertson, 378.

³ Brooks, 218.

⁴ Robertson, 378.

Jesus' second advent would occur (Mark 13:32). Some of His prophecy would be fulfilled in the next few years; other parts of it would not be fulfilled until the far-off future.

Jesus' words teach us that there is folly in men making predictions about the Lord's return. We should stay silent on dates and deadlines. The Lord never intended for us to know when He will return. Conspiracies and controversies concerning Christ's return have gripped the Church throughout the ages. In recent years, misguided Christian teachers have seized the opportunity to attract crowds by making bold pronouncements. Diseases, current events, wars, political upheaval, and the like have all been used as opportunities to announce that Christ's return is near. Such date-setting sensationalism goes against the grain of Jesus' prophetic teaching. Our Lord told us that we can't know the exact date of His return.

If He had given us a date, many would respond in despair if the event appeared to be far out into the future. Knowing that no relief was in sight, the Church would perhaps be given over to despondency and discouragement in the face of fallen society. On the flip side, if Jesus had given a date for His return, others would become slack and lazy in disciple making and world missions.

Can you imagine what it would have been like if the early Church would have known the date of Christ's return? How would they have responded, if they would have been aware that He wasn't going to return for at least two thousand years? They surely wouldn't have been as motivated toward holiness and the fear of God. Gospel advancement may not have received the hot-hearted devotion it did.⁵

We could probably say the same for ourselves. If we knew when Christ was going to return, we probably may not be as faithful to our duties as we ought to be. Some argue that people would probably be more motivated if they knew the exact date of Christ's return. The way in which the Lord concealed the date of His return reveals otherwise. The Lord withheld details concerning exact timing in His Divine wisdom, knowing an answer would not help us in any way. In fact, an answer would likely have been detrimental to the Church.

Verse 33

In verse 33, Jesus gave a call for vigilance in light of His return, saying, "Watch! Be alert! For you don't know when the time is coming" (Mark 13:33). Though none knows when Christ will return, faithful believers should live with a spirit of readiness. The New Testament consistently calls believers to be prepared for Christ's appearing. Peter said, "We also have the prophetic word strongly confirmed, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (2 Peter 1:19). No believer should use the unknowability of the exact timing of last-day events as an excuse for spiritual laziness. All are to be on guard.

⁵ Ryle, 230.

The Greek word translated “Be alert” in our current verse is one that literally meant “to chase away sleep.”⁶ It carried the idea of being watchful, being alert, or being on the lookout.⁷ One has said the term involved a call “to be vigilant in awareness of threatening peril.”⁸ The syntax of the original language uses a present tense imperative verb. As a result, it calls for a continual and constant spiritual alertness.⁹ Christians should always be on the lookout for Jesus’ second coming.

Ultimately, such readiness involves a commitment to live the Christian life — the life spoken of earlier in Mark’s gospel. In Mark 8:34, Jesus said, “If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” To be prepared for Jesus’ second appearing, Christians should follow Christ and embrace His mission. Their motives, actions, priorities, and stewardship should always be under the spotlight of God’s Word. End-time vigilance does not require adding anything extra onto Christ’s commands. It simply involves embracing the simple imperatives of the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40) and the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20).

Verse 34

In verse 34, Jesus introduced a parable to make His point. Some have called it a mini parable.¹⁰ Our Lord said, “It is like a man on a journey, who left his house, gave authority to his servants, gave each one his work, and commanded the doorkeeper to be alert” (Mark 13:34). Earlier in Mark’s gospel, a “house” was used on multiple occasions in a way that made connotations to the Church (Mark 1:29; 2:15; 7:24; 9:33; and 10:10). Since homes were standard meeting places for believers in first-century Rome, the gospel writer strategically made mention of homes in order to allude to discipleship and the mission of Christ’s body. Through Jesus’ parable in our current passage, Mark did the same thing. He used a house as a metaphor for our belonging in the body of Christ.

Building and construction metaphors are often used of the Church in the New Testament (1 Peter 2:5). As members of Christ’s body (1 Corinthians 12:12-18), we each have respective parts to play. Christ is the head of the Church (Colossians 1:18), and we are to function underneath His leadership. We each have a responsibility in introducing others to the reconciliation that is available in Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:18). We have all have been entrusted with one, great mission (Matthew 28:18-20).

Jesus used the customs related to first-century households to convey the way in which the Church should be committed to its mission. Notice from His metaphor that there were different “servants” who each had special “work.” The representation is of the way in which individual members of the body of Christ have special, God-given abilities

⁶ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 97.

⁷ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 97.

⁸ Schnabel, 338.

⁹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 97.

¹⁰ Brooks, 218.

for the upbuilding of the Kingdom. The New Testament teaches that believers, at salvation, receive unique spiritual gifts to use in Christ's service (Romans 12:6-8). Such gifts come along with the indwelling of the Spirit (John 3:3). It is the responsibility of each servant to identify his or her gifts and use them in service for Jesus.

Commenting on the metaphor in our passage, one has said, "All of the servants in a well-ordered household know what their role is, and attend to it. Only when each individual fulfills his or her own task does the household run smoothly."¹¹ The same is true for the Christian Church. Individual congregations will never be strong and effective for Christ unless church members own their God-given duties.

Our text teaches us of our need to be serious about our Christian service until Christ returns. The fourth-century Christian theologian Jerome was known for saying, "Be doing something that the devil may always find you engaged."¹² Believers should regularly look at their lives and make evaluations about their commitments to service within the Church. They should take honest inventory, seeking to discover whether or not they are faithfully engaged in Great Commission efforts. In our text, Jesus indicates that the Lord has given to "each one his work." Church history tells of John Calvin's commitment to labor for His Lord. As he aged, his closest friends often encouraged him to relax and do less work. He was known to reply, "Would you have my Master find me idle?"¹³ The spirit of Calvin has been lost on modern believers. May we learn to live with an awareness of the soon-return of Jesus. May the prospect of His coming propel us to greater work in Christian service, evangelism, and discipleship.

In addition to first-century "servants," Jesus also spoke of a "doorkeeper." The Koine Greek of the text refers to "the one who stood guard at the entrance of a courtyard which served several houses."¹⁴ One has commented on the duties of this first-century figure — "It was the task of the doorkeeper to exclude unwanted visitors and to admit those who were welcome, including the master himself, letting them enter the house through the doors which were locked from the inside."¹⁵

What does the doorkeeper represent in Jesus' parable? Perhaps Jesus intended to make allusion to the four apostles (Peter, James, John, and Andrew) who asked the questions that prompted Jesus' teaching in our chapter (Mark 13:3).¹⁶ Some see the "doorkeeper" as a figure for the spiritual leaders who would oversee the Church. According to Ephesians 2:19-20, apostles and prophets had a foundational role in establishing the Church. After they passed from the scene, the Lord intended for pastors and evangelists to function as shepherds and leaders (Ephesians 4:11-12). With this

¹¹ Ferguson, 220.

¹² Ryle, 233.

¹³ Ryle, 233.

¹⁴ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 97.

¹⁵ Schnabel, 338.

¹⁶ Schnabel, 339.

doctrinal truth in mind, it seems that Jesus' parable makes mention of a "doorkeeper" in order to show the importance of faithfulness amongst those who shepherd the Lord's flock. In some ways, one could imagine Paul's words from 2 Timothy 4:1-5 as being nested in Jesus' mention of the doorkeeper:

I solemnly charge you before God and Christ Jesus, who is going to judge the living and the dead, and because of his appearing and his kingdom: Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and encourage with great patience and teaching. For the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, will multiply teachers for themselves because they have an itch to hear what they want to hear. They will turn away from hearing the truth and will turn aside to myths. But as for you, exercise self-control in everything, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry (2 Timothy 4:1-5).

Jesus' instruction to the doorkeeper was "to be alert" (Mark 13:34). Interestingly, the Lord used different verbiage than that used back in verse 33 to speak of the need for vigilance on the part of His shepherds. The Greek work in our text means "to watch" or "to keep awake."¹⁷ Pastor's are to work hard to make sure they stay focused on their responsibilities. The return of Jesus should always be on the horizon of their minds. They must not get entangled by all of the mundane things of this world (2 Timothy 2:4). Instead, they should keep themselves prepped for the Lord's return, making sure that when He returns He will find them faithful in preaching (2 Timothy 4:2), prayer (Acts 6:4), and the leading of the work of ministry (Ephesians 4:12-13).

Verse 35

After giving His short parable, Jesus instructed His disciples, saying, "Therefore be alert, since you don't know when the master of the house is coming—whether in the evening or at midnight or at the crowing of the rooster or early in the morning" (Mark 13:35). The "master of the house" was the same man who left the house at the beginning of verse 34. He undoubtedly represented Jesus in the parable. Just as the man entrusted His servants with work and departed with a prospect of returning again, Jesus has left His followers on earth (John 13:33) and He has entrusted them with a specified responsibility (Matthew 28:18-20). Though He has departed, He has also promised to return again (John 14:3).

The call to "be alert" was issued in verse 35 for the fourth time in our passage. On this occasion, Jesus made mention of four different periods of time — "evening," "midnight," at the crowing of the rooster," and "early in the morning." The four different time values were associated with the four different watches of the night.¹⁸ Mark used the Roman way of reckoning. He mentioned the same accounting of time in Mark

¹⁷ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 97.

¹⁸ Robertson, 378.

6:47-48.¹⁹ These watches covered the time of day from six in the evening to six in the morning.²⁰ Such hours were most commonly associated with rest and leisure.

By making these the hours for watching, Jesus underscored the need for vigilance on the part of His followers. Christians are to constantly be on the lookout for Christ's return. Until the end comes, they are to diligently attend to His affairs. Jesus elsewhere told a more lengthy parable to emphasize the need for vigilance (Matthew 25:14-30). Paul gave a lot of teaching on the subject (1 Corinthians 3:13-14 and 4:1-4; 2 Corinthians 5:9-10).

Verse 36

Verse 36 contained a warning from Jesus — “Otherwise, when he comes suddenly he might find you sleeping” (Mark 13:36). The word translated “suddenly” didn’t necessarily mean that Jesus would return quickly or soon. In keeping with the metaphor, it conveyed the idea of the master arriving soon after the servants saw signs of His return.²¹ The imagery fits with Jesus’ last-days teaching. Remember the disciples’ question concerning the “sign” of the last days spawned our Lord’s teaching in the Olivet Discourse. As a result, by speaking of the master returning “suddenly,” Jesus meant to emphasize the importance of the signs of which He spoke. Disciples could expect a quick return once they began to see the events of Jesus’ teaching fulfilled.

The Lord’s entire point in speaking of a sudden return was to encourage watchfulness on the part of His followers. Commenting on our verse, one has said, “This is one of the cardinal principles of true Christian living: to live every day in the light of Christ’s certain return; to do everything — yes, everything — for his inspection.”²² One has described John Wesley’s vigilance concerning Christ’s return: “How would you spend tomorrow if you knew Jesus was going to return in the evening? John Wesley was once asked that question as he made his way from one preaching engagement to another. He took out his diary, read the list of engagements he had for the following day, and said, ‘These are the things I would do tomorrow if I knew the Lord was returning then.’”²³ The point is that God’s people should always make sure their daily activities are in alignment with God’s will. They should prioritize each day as if it would be their last. If so, they will have no fear of the return of Christ. They will be prepared.

Verse 37

Jesus closed His sermon with yet another warning for His disciples to be on the lookout — “And what I say to you, I say to everyone: Be alert!” (Mark 13:37). Five times within

¹⁹ Brooks, 218.

²⁰ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 97.

²¹ Schnabel, 339.

²² Ferguson, 220.

²³ Ferguson, 221.

the Olivet Discourse, using different verbs (verses 5, 9, 23, 33, and 35), He told His readers to remain vigilant. Jesus placed profound weight on the need for spiritual alertness. Such was His oft-repeated application in His end-time teaching. In our current verse, He used a word that simply meant “to be awake.”²⁴ He once again used a present imperative verb, commanding a habit-of-life activity.²⁵

The person and number of the verb was significant as well. Mark used a second person, plural form of the verb.²⁶ Thus, he depicted Jesus as addressing a multitude of individuals. Along with the mention of “everyone,” Jesus’ words indicated that the Olivet Discourse did not just have application for its original recipients. Its eschatological truth had bearing on Christians of all generations. There wasn’t just a near fulfillment of the prophetic sermon; there was a far fulfillment as well. Believers are to live with an ongoing awareness that Christ could return at any moment.

Jesus’ repetitive emphasis on the need to “be alert” should leave a mark on us. In all of our study of end-time events, we should walk away with an awareness that continual, ongoing, spiritual attentiveness is the greatest need of the hour! If our study of the last days does not lead us to such a conclusion, our study of the last days has proven futile. May we learn to be on the lookout.

²⁴ Robertson, 378.

²⁵ Robertson, 378.

²⁶ Schnabel, 339.